

Opening Statement of Chairman Mollohan on US-Mexico Border Violence

Good afternoon. We are here today to discuss the rising tide of drug cartel-related violence in the US-Mexico border region and our federal response to this problem. As with any issue related to the border, this problem has many dimensions, and it requires a response with many dimensions. Other subcommittees have already examined the border security and foreign aid elements of our response; today we will be focusing on the law enforcement response.

It would be difficult to overstate the severity of the situation in Mexico today. There have been over 7,000 cartel-related killings in Mexico since the beginning of 2007, including increasingly brazen attacks on law enforcement, political and governmental targets. The level of brutality in many of these attacks is truly appalling, with details so gruesome that they could have come straight from the script of a horror movie.

This violence is being fueled by the constant northbound trafficking of tons of narcotics and the southbound trafficking of cash and weapons. This traffic has created a literal war zone in the streets of some Mexican towns and states, as the Mexican government has deployed its military to join law enforcement officers in pitched battles against these cartels.

The United States has both an interest in and an obligation to help Mexico overcome these difficult challenges. We are fortunate to have a dedicated partner in President Calderon, who has staked his personal and professional legacy on beating these cartels. The Department of Justice has a significant role to play in aiding his struggle, and we look forward to hearing more today about how our federal law enforcement entities can bring their resources and expertise to bear on this situation.

At the same time, we must also be cognizant of the potential for “spillover” violence, when the violent crimes of these Mexican cartels begin to cross the border into our southwestern states and beyond. We have seen lots of media reports over the past several months about cartel-related violence springing up in states from Arizona to Maine. It is important for us to assess the potential for spillover violence, look at the impacts cartel-driven violence has had in our local communities, and discuss strategies to prevent it. In doing so, we must balance the need to acknowledge the seriousness of the situation with the need to avoid unnecessary hysteria.

It is my hope that our hearing today will inform the subcommittee’s discussion of these issues over the next few months. We certainly couldn’t have picked a more timely date to kick off that discussion, as the Administration announced just this morning a comprehensive border violence policy that takes advantage of the significant new resources this subcommittee provided for border crimes over the last few months. Those resources include over \$15 million in regular and supplemental funds for ATF’s Project Gunrunner, \$21 million for DEA to expand its enforcement operations along the border and in Mexico and Central America, and \$10 million for DEA to target Mexican methamphetamine trafficking. It is my intention to follow up on these investments with a subcommittee trip to the southwest border region, where I hope to see these resources in action and gain some perspective that will help us to make additional resource decisions in fiscal year 2010.

Our witnesses today will also help to provide that perspective and to set the stage for the 2010 process. On our first panel, we will hear from Professor David Shirk, the director of the Trans-Border Institute at the University of San Diego. Professor Shirk will place current events within the broader context of crime and judicial reform in Mexico and will give his assessment of both the Mexican and US responses to the violence.

We will then turn to our second panel, which includes Mayor Phil Gordon from the City of Phoenix, Special Agent Bill Newell from ATF's Phoenix Division, and Special Agent Joseph Arabit from DEA's El Paso Division. These three witnesses are on the ground in our southwest border states, attempting to address this problem every day. They will give us some insight into the challenges they face; discuss their efforts to combat cartel-related violence and its underlying causes; and suggest some ways to improve our strategies going forward.

I would like to thank all of our witnesses in advance for their time today. We look forward to having a lively discussion with you.

Before we begin with Professor Shirk, I would like to turn to our ranking member, Mr. Wolf, for any opening remarks he would like to make.